This book was fresh from the press, nearly half a century ago, when I was given a copy by a French friend who was leaving Europe for Sri Lanka: an inscription says lyrically “Loin des yeux, loin du cœur — Je n’y crois pas! La poesie abolit l’espace.” For me this collection of Sanskrit poems in English translation has “abolished space” in many different ways, principally by shrinking the centuries separating our time from that of the poets. There are many rivals to this book, and many gifted translators have used their gifts to great effect in translating Sanskrit verse into English verse, but Brough is always the one I return to. I remembered the translator as a gruff and intimidating man; yet who would know this from reading these lines from Dharmakīrti? —

A hundred times I learnt from my philosophy  
To think no more of love, this vanity,  
This dream, this source of all regret,  
This emptiness.  
But no philosophy can make my heart forget  
Her loveliness.

Whereas many translators use free verse as a kind of staccato prose, with line breaks falling randomly or following mere syntax, translations of this calibre are structured with great care for the rhythm of the lines and the impact of their cadences. Brough had a wonderful ear for the English poetic line. Elsewhere he used rhyme and strict metre to great effect also:

The moon tries every month in vain  
To paint a picture of your face;  
And, having failed to catch its grace,  
Destroys the work, and starts again.
Starts again… with a closing rhyme to echo the opening one. The variations of style in these translations gives the reader a feel for the great poetic diversity resing in the anthologised originals. The playfulness of the poetry is wonderfully caught by the playfulness of variation in the English versions, as here, where Brough employs a kind of concrete verse that will test my typesetting skills to the full:

Shun these six faults to win success:
   Sleep, sloth,
   Fear, wrath,
   Slovenliness, longwindedness.

Elsewhere, it’s a Latin reference that does the intratextual trick with depth of field:

A day he does no harm, an evil man
Counts as a dies non in his life’s span.

And here, translating the great Bhartṛhari, a macaronic neatly plays standard English against its archaic cousin:

This is the truth, good people, and no lie.
Why should I lie? In heaven, and earth, and hell
Womman is mannes blis and al his joye:
Womman is mannes onlie grief as wel.

The collection is prefaced by a 40-page introduction aimed at a general readership. Everything about the book appeals: and though hugely clever, it wears its cleverness lightly and is never aggressively charming. It played a part in leading me towards the study of Indian languages. Sadly, the book seems to be out of print, but copies are available on Amazon for the price of a cup of coffee…and who needs coffee when Yogeśvara and John Brough join forces to bring us this vision? —

Look at the cloud-cat, lapping there on high
With lightning tongue the moon-milk from the sky!